

Southern Arkansas was a generous but exhausted land. The house in which I now lived was a natural addition to this magnificent land. Built during the depression years of cheap labor, the House — so named by Helen — reflected my grandparent's unbounded optimism. They had built it with a profitable business and Depression-priced labor. They shamelessly flaunted their prosperity in a culture that was painfully impoverished. No one seemed to mind. The South has always been kind to its elitists. They were a chosen people, or so they claimed with every offering of ebullience. No one questioned their credentials — especially when my grandmother imported bricks from New Orleans streets, painted wicker chairs from replete Havana shops, and crystal chandeliers from abandoned Liverpool mansions. I remember that the bricks surrounding our fireplace evoked a faint smell of horse manure every winter as we enjoyed our winter fires.

The House was a testimony both to my grandmother's generosity and to her eccentricity. Five thousand square feet, six bedrooms and five full baths, and a full basement — the only full basement in my below sea level community — the house appeared in *Southern Living* in 1931 and 1932. The kitchen was built of cool New Orleans bricks and attached to the house by a closed walkway.

Helen was no Civil Rights activist, nor did she pretend that she had any high moral standards. Helen was no hypocrite. She was a cold realist, and she cared for no one more than herself. She loved us all dearly, but she loved herself more. She knew a propitious place to build a house and was not going to let the absence of money or the pretension of Southern society stop her.

Old man John John Parker at first denied her request. But Helen walked into his business, the Fitzgerald County stock exchange, sat on his lap, kissed him on the mouth (not the cheek!), and asked in her most polished and sophisticated Southern accent, "Please, Mr. John John, will you lend me the money to build my house?" Whether from warm enticement of further benefits or from cold fear that she would do something else to embarrass him, Old Man Parker lent her the money at no interest. The deal was sealed when Helen promised to bake him a Christmas pecan pie for the rest of his life. And she did. Parker ate pecan pie every Christmas until he died. Only once did Helen fail to live up to her bargain — one season the pecan crop was abysmally bad, and she had to substitute Vermont walnuts. Helen did not like to cook — nor did she have to cook. But when she did anything, cooking, building a house, playing hide and seek with her grandchildren, she played and cooked to win.

(James P. Stobaugh)